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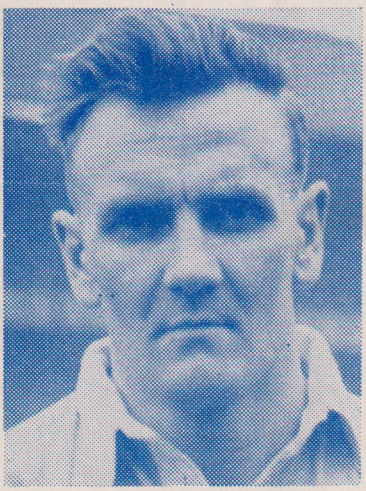

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Farewell to "Oor Wullie"

A Great Player bows out — but keeps going with the Younger Generation.

An appreciation of WILLIE CUNNINGHAM, a North Ender through and through

By WALTER PILKINGTON

(Sports Editor of the "Lancashire Evening Post" and chronicler of P.N.E affairs for 36 years).

North End supporters and, I hope, many other sportsmen from places near and far where this fine old club's name still stands for what is best in football, are assembled at Deepdale to-night to pay due honour and tribute to what the Irish would call "a foine man," even though he is a Scot who has settled at Preston.

The Deepdale club never had a better or more loyal servant than Willie Cunningham, not even Joe McCall or his own idol among players, the great Tom Finney.

To-night he is given a Testimonial Match by the North End club in recognition of 14 seasons' sterling service, and he deserves well of it. It is a big occasion if a sad one. The passing years cannot be stayed and youth must be served.

A fine player who has been a credit to his profession, and earned lasting admiration and esteem by unspared effort and many performances of high quality is bowing out. Some noted colleagues famed for their deeds with a number of clubs readily undertook to do their best to make it a night to remember.

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If the fare provided is as entertaining as that with which Tom Finney's multitude of fans were regaled, when there was a similar exhibition of football talent three years ago to mark his long regretted retirement, Willie will be a happy man.

You may be sure the other 21 players on view turned out determined, as Lancashire people say, to "do him proud."

Staying on.

Willie Cunningham's first team days are over, time having taken its toll, but I am pleased, as are his countless other admirers, that the directors of North End wisely realised that his knowledge and experience could be beneficial in guiding and developing young material along the right lines.

They gave him the opportunity to be player-coach with the Reserves, most of whom are less than half his age. Willie's acceptance of the job not only ensured continuity of service, but made him an asset in a different and essential sphere. The old general is in his element fostering his boys and passing on what he learned in a hard school.

It was as hard as the way of life he knew in his native Fifeshire, where, in his youth, everything had to be worked for and whatever was gained was valued because it was earned. It shaped his approach to life in the sense that only if you put all you have into it can you hope to take something out.

Old guard.

When Tom Finney retired Willie Cunningham became the last of what may be termed "the old guard," and there were many fine players among them, Deepdale favourites as fondly recalled as Joe Dunn, Tommy Docherty, Willie Forbes, Joe

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Marston, Frank O'Farrell, Fred Else, Joe Walton, Charlie Wayman, Jimmy Baxter, Bobbie Beattie, Ken Horton, Tommy Thompson, Angus Morrison, and of course, his own ideal footballer, Finney.

So often he said, in a tone daring anyone to contradict him, "He was the best. Any team would have a chance with that man in." He admired Docherty for his pluck and perseverance, Wayman for his skill and slick opportunism, Marston for his toughness, Forbes for his "last ditch" persistence, Beattie for his quick-thinking football brain.

Of Baxter, his cousin, he said, "There was nothing of him, but what a player ! Guts and craft, he was short of neither."

Cunningham, you see, was obviously born to the game not just because he loved playing it, but because he could see and admire and profit from the ability of fellow-craftsmen.

Rough diamond.

Yet when he arrived at Deepdale, a modestly-priced buy from relegated Airdrie in the summer of 1949, his kindest critic would not have wedded Willie to the finer arts in an early summing up of his prowess and promise.

They would have sensed quickly a powerful heart without the evidence of native dourness. They would not have failed to notice a rather ungainly awkwardness as distinct from elegance in his gait.

Spion Kop's immediate reaction was to dub him "Cowboy," an affectionate appellation which stuck long after he had risen to the peak and become captain of Scotland.

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He came to Deepdale as rough-hewn as the coal he had mined, but the crowd took to "Oor Wullie." They liked his spirit. They admired his determination to improve.

What a bargain buy he proved to be. Soon he was a fixture in the team. He gained international honours. The never-despair fighter blossomed out as a brilliant strategist and footballer.

Ups and downs.

He had his triumphs and he suffered disappointments. The greatest of these were so narrowly missing Cup-winners and League Championship medals with North End. Sadder still to Willie was the humiliation of going into the Second Division.

Through good and bad in the span of years Cunningham had the personal satisfaction of carving out for himself a niche among the North End immortals. This club at one time provided England's backs, Bob Howarth and Bob Holmes, both Preston-born.

There have been some star turns, going back to Jack Winchester. But the finest full backs at Deepdale in 50 years have been Tommy Rodway, Tom Hamilton, Andy Beattie and Cunningham, three of them Scots. Is there another on the way ? For Willie has said of young Ross, "Here's a grand lad coming along," and that was before he got into the first team.

100 per cent.

Fittingly Cunningham finished his great career as captain of Preston North End. Many are the players he has inspired by the double example of grit and

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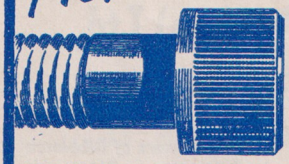

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ability. Often I have maintained that he meant as much to the Preston defence for a decade as Finney meant to the attack.

This chunk of human granite, whose dark visage and truculent mien belie his pawky humour and kindly ways, was above all a team-man, unyielding and tough. He once told me, "I always hated my team to lose. As a kid I cried in vexation if we did !"

He soon grew out of that, and immature stubbornness developed into an indomitable spirit which made Willie Cunningham a prime favourite of enthusiasts who still regard football as a man's game and set a high value on endeavour. Win or lose, his admirers could always count on 100 per cent effort from this Deepdale bulwark whose paramount pleasure is playing the game he loves.

Although blessed with natural skill, he was rugged and decisive rather than stylish or crafty at the outset of his North End career.

Shrewd move.

Through it, he needed time to establish himself and the turning point was Will Scott's shrewd move of switching Willie from left to right back in his second season. Quickly adapting himself to his new position he acquired the polished, thoughtful touches which created the enduring image of Cunningham, the wholehearted full back who excelled as a master of strategy.

He made 440 League appearances for North End of a maximum 588 and played in 41 of a possible 43 F.A. Cup games. He was dropped three times in his first two seasons and never again left out by choice until his 14th and last as a senior player.

In these three seasons he was not chosen for 53 first team matches. Of the remaining 95 he missed, 92 were accounted for by injuries, two by international calls and one by a bereavement.

(continued on page 11)

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3
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(Bolton W. and England)

4
Tommy Docherty
(P.N.E. and Scotland)

5
Joe Dunn
(P.N.E.)

6
Frank O'Farrell & Willie Forbes
(P.N.E. and Eire) *(P.N.E.)*

7
Tom Finney
(P.N.E. and England)

8
Tommy Thompson
(P.N.E. and England)

9
Nat Lofthouse
(Bolton W. and England)

10
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(P.N.E.)

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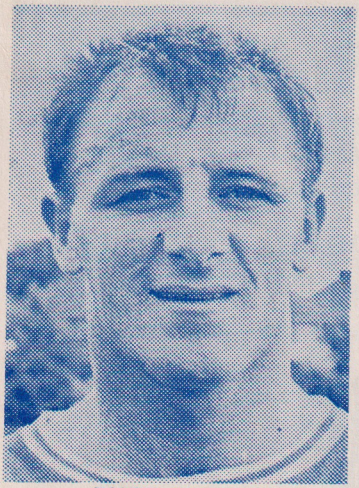

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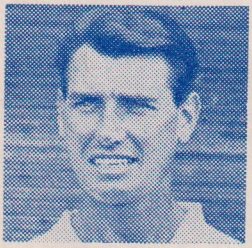

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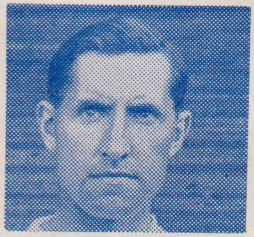

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continued from page 7

He played for Scotland against England, Wales, Hungary, Austria, Finland, Uruguay and Norway (twice) in the mid-'50's and here is his North End record in detail :—

	Divsn	L'gue	Cup
1949-50 ...	2	30	2
1950-51 ...	2	31	2
1951-52 ...	1	42	1
1952-53 ...	1	41	3
1953-54 ...	1	30	7
1954-55 ...	1	24	3
1955-56 ...	1	24	1
1956-57 ...	1	41	6
1957-58 ...	1	42	1
1958-59 ...	1	42	6
1959-60 ...	1	24	0
1960-61 ...	1	31	2
1961-62 ...	2	29	7
1962-63 ...	2	9	0
		440	41

Total goals—3

"Many thanks."

Lastly I have an unsolicited letter from Willie Cunningham, typical of the man. He writes :—

"May I say a very big 'Thank you' to the supporters of Preston North End, who have always treated me with respect both on the field and off it.

"Everything my wife and I have we owe to Preston North End and the public who follow the club.

"The one thing I shall remember most in my association with P.N.E. is having had the honour of playing with the greatest footballer of my time, Tom Finney.

"To you, Walter, who have done so much to make me a favourite with the public, I thank you most sincerely for everything. We have had different opinions sometimes, but it was always for the good of the game."

WILLIE CUNNINGHAM.

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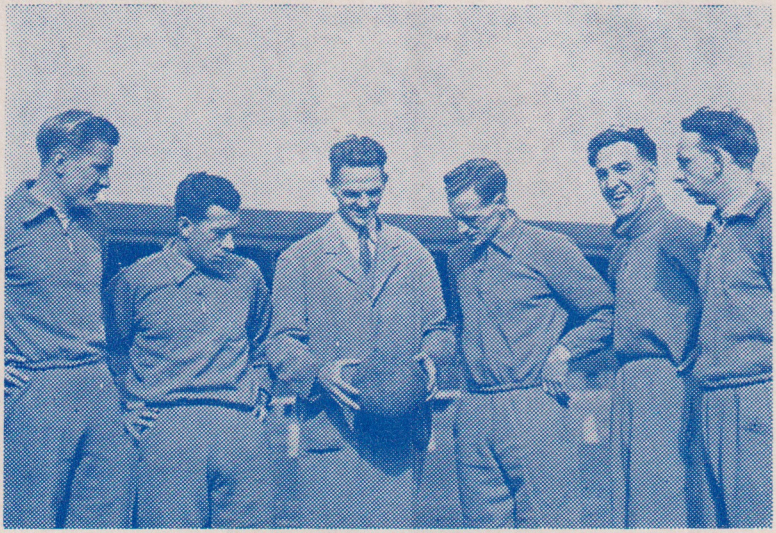

A Chat at Deepdale during preparations for the 1954 Cup Final.
(*Left to right*) Mattinson, Cunningham, Jim Milne (*then trainer*), Tom Finney, Forbes and Baxter.

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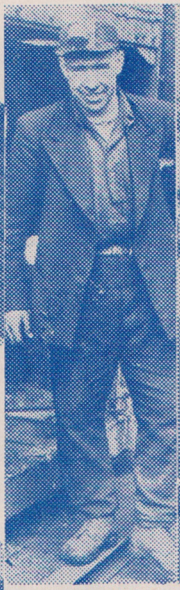

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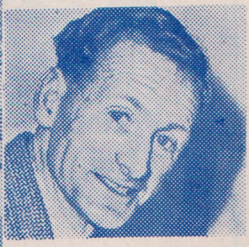

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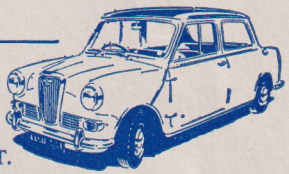

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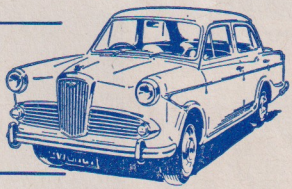

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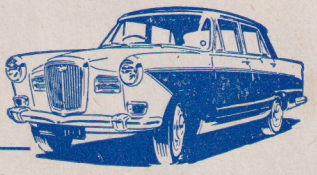

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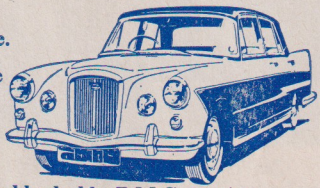

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